

Jael and Sisera

BY VELAZQUEZ



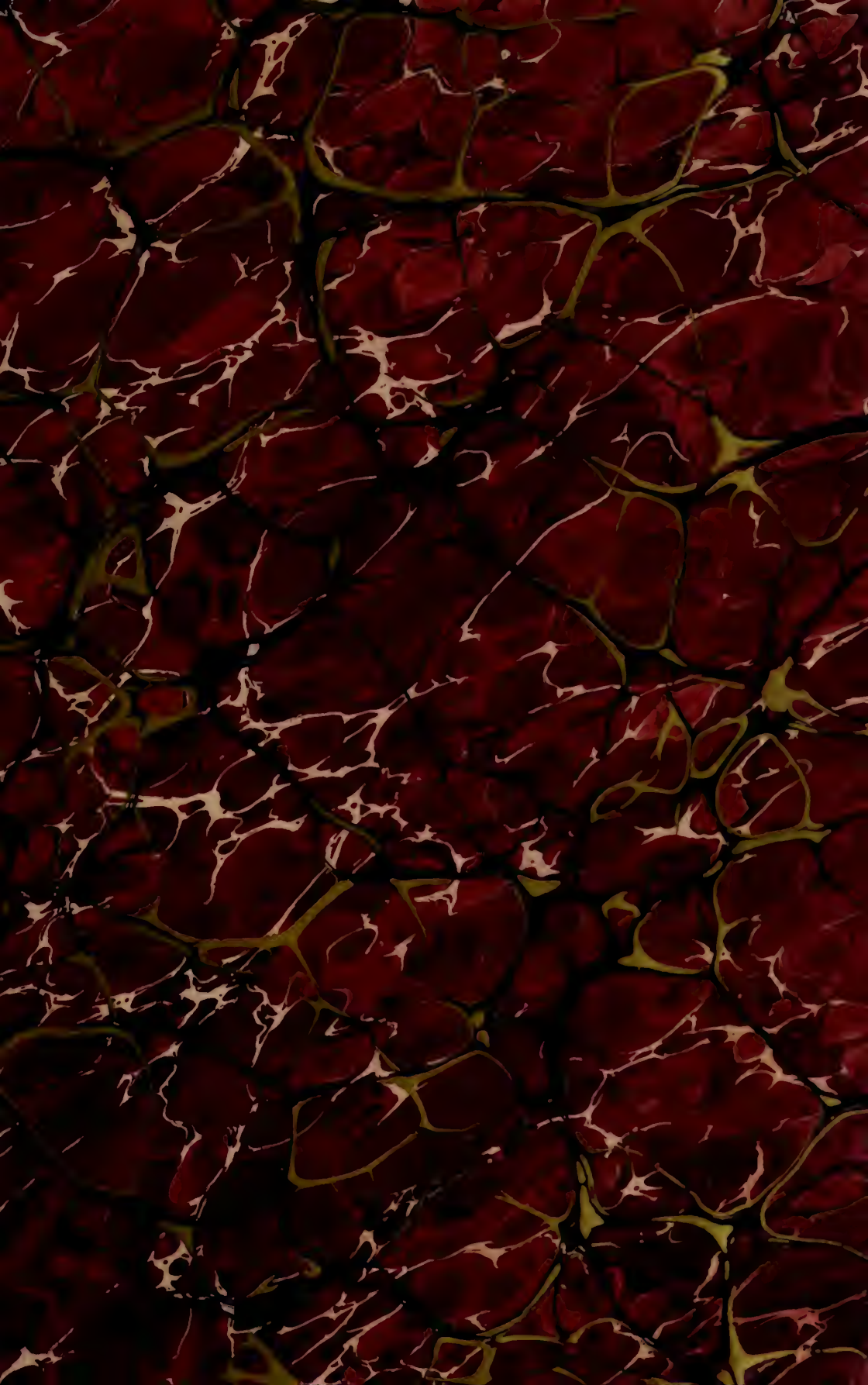
J. C. ROBINSON

1896





A. PITT-RIVERS.



General Pitt Rivers
with the water
but compliments

JAEI AND SISERA

Sik-W

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JAEI AND SISERA.

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Jael and Sisera

NOTICE OF A PICTURE BY VELAZQUEZ

HERETOFORE UNDESCRIBED

CONTRIBUTED TO THE EXHIBITION OF SPANISH ART

AT THE NEW GALLERY, JANUARY 1896

BY

SIR J. C. ROBINSON

HONORARY MEMBER OF THE ACADEMIES OF THE FINE ARTS
OF MADRID AND LISBON, ETC.

HER MAJESTY'S SURVEYOR OF PICTURES

*Robinson sale Berlin 31 Dec 1894 for the Surveyor of the
London 26 May 1895 for the Surveyor of the Pictures*

LONDON

1896

JAEI AND SISERA

AN UNDESCRIBED PICTURE BY VELAZQUEZ

VELAZQUEZ (Don Diego de Silva Velazquez) was born in 1599, at Seville, perhaps at that time the most considerable centre of art and letters in the Spanish Peninsula. He was one of those to whom the inspiration of art came at an early age by nature. His station in life was a comparatively fortunate one; it secured him an adequate education, and his subsequent art training was effected under the guidance successively of two of the most celebrated national painters of the day. In addition to the afflatus of genius he was endowed with the practical qualities of industry and right conduct. He was a ready and productive worker and before his twenty-third or twenty-fourth year, when the picture which is the subject of this notice is believed to have been painted, he had doubtless produced a considerable number of finished pictures, and had already acquired great reputation in his native city. Many of his early works produced in Seville are still extant, and although they were greatly eclipsed by his after performances they are still regarded as precious masterpieces of art.

In 1622, apparently prompted and assisted by influential friends, he made his first appearance in Madrid, the seat of government and the residence of the monarch. The reigning king was Philip IV., then a young man of seventeen, who had succeeded his father Philip III.

in the preceding year. The king was both a lover and practiser of the art of painting. He had commenced his reign by the dismissal of his father's celebrated minister the Cardinal Duke of Lerma, and had installed in his place the Count of Olivarez, a nobleman of high family and means and a native of Seville. Velazquez came to Madrid with introductions to influential members of the court, in particular to Don Juan Fonseca, a noted amateur and patron of art, who was also usher of the curtain to the king. Fonseca immediately procured him access to the art treasures of the crown in the palaces in Madrid and the Escorial.

During this first visit, however, Velazquez did not succeed in obtaining the direct patronage of the king, and after some months' study in the royal palaces he returned to Seville. His Madrid friends, however, having doubtless brought his recent productions to the notice of Olivarez, the all-powerful minister sent for the painter early in the ensuing year (1623). On Velazquez's arrival in the capital he was lodged in the house of Fonseca, whose portrait he forthwith painted. It was shown to the king the same night, and was the immediate determining cause of his success. Philip forthwith appointed him his court painter, with a stipend and emoluments of unusual liberality. Thenceforth to the end of his days (in 1660) the career of the artist was of ever progressive brilliancy and success. The title of king's painter, *pictor regis*, was (on 31st October, 1623) assumed by Velazquez, and he has so signed himself on more than one of his principal works. Heretofore Velazquez had mainly painted still life and domestic subjects, styled in the Spanish language *bodegonés*, literally shop or kitchen pictures. Of these *bodegones*, the famous *Aguador de Sevilla*, belonging to the Duke of Wellington, and the *Peasant Woman making an Omelette*, in Sir Francis Cook's collection, are perhaps the most excellent examples; these pictures were probably executed at about the same time (1620). There is no record of his having produced any historical or "subject" picture of importance during his Sevillian period.

Although Velazquez was no doubt actively productive during his first period of residence in Madrid (in 1622), and still more so in the ensuing year, when he finally settled there, we have but slight record of these performances and the most notable of them, the equestrian portrait of Philip IV., is known to have been destroyed by fire in 1734. It is, however, most unlikely that all the other works of these two years should have perished and consequently it is reasonable to suppose, that as in the present instance, some of them will yet be identified and brought to light.

The picture now in question, although apparently not dated, carries so many internal evidences corroborative and conclusive in themselves, so strengthened moreover by external indications, as to leave little doubt that it is one of the pictures by Velazquez, produced in Madrid either in 1622 or 1623.

On this point it may be observed, that one of the figures in the *Jacl and Sisera* is a portrait of the minister Olivarez, of whom we have many other portraits at various times of his life, and that the present picture obviously represents him at an earlier age than any of the others. Apparently indeed at the exact age—thirty-six—which he would have attained in 1622-3. Moreover, the picture bears a signature in which the term *pictor regis* is believed to be indicated. These indications, taken together with the style of execution and general aspect of the work which are precisely those which might be expected to have been displayed in the interval between the execution of the "*bodegone*" pictures in 1620, and others extant, painted two or three years after 1623, it is thought are sufficiently conclusive as to the period of production of the *Jacl and Sisera*.

The earliest of Velazquez's historical pictures, properly so called, of which definite record has been preserved, is that of the *Expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain* under Philip III. This picture, painted in 1627, is, however, no longer extant, and it is generally believed to have been destroyed in a fire at the Alcazar, in 1734.¹ From the

¹ In Cumberland's *Anecdotes of Spanish Painting*. London, 1782. Vol. ii. p. 18.

It is stated that one of the principal figures in the picture was a "personification

description of the picture, which has come down to us however, it is known to have been characterised by a precisely similar mingling of allegorical and naturalistic treatment as is seen in the *Jael and Sisera*.

The picture now in question, representing the biblical story of Jael and Sisera, according to Velazquez's habitual practice, is treated in an entirely naturalistic manner, all the details of the picture having been evidently painted direct from the natural objects, put into position in the locality where the picture was executed, or copied from outdoor studies as the case required. The action depicted is from Judges c. 4, v. 22, "And behold as Barak pursued Sisera Jael came out to meet him, and said unto him, Come and I will show thee the man whom thou seekest; and when he came unto her tent behold Sisera lay dead and the nail was in his temples."

of the Kingdom of Spain as a majestic matron in *Roman armour*." Now as Velazquez is known, whenever it was possible, to have painted every detail of his pictures from the actual objects, it may, it is thought with great probability, be conjectured, that the "Roman armour" in the *Expulsion of the Moriscos* picture was painted from an actual suit, just as the Sisera is represented in "Roman armour" which belonged to the Emperor Charles V. Moreover, as this particular suit in the seventeenth century was almost certainly an unique specimen of "Roman armour"; *i.e.* of pseudo-antique style, it is most likely to have been the model for both the pictures in question. In regard to the disappearance of the *Expulsion of the Moriscos* nothing is definitely known as to the fate of the picture, possibly it may yet be in existence. It has not, perhaps, been hitherto noticed, that a Spanish writer on art of great authority, Don Valentin Carderera, writing in 1860, states that "this picture, which adorned the grand saloon of the queens in the palace of the Retiro, was, it is said, taken away by the French General Sebastiani." If so the *Expulsion of the Moriscos* was still in existence in the early part of the present century, and is unlikely to have been since destroyed. This information occurs in one of the notes to Carderera's edition of Juseppe Martinez, *Arte de la Pintura*, &c., published for the first time in Madrid in 1860. From the text of this publication we learn that the picture was of great size—about 15 feet long by 10 feet high—and it seems very unlikely that the French Marshal would have elected to carry off so unwieldy a canvas. The writer suggests that further research might possibly result in the recovery of this celebrated work; it may, for instance, have been taken down during the French occupation of the Retiro Palace and rolled up; if so it would, perhaps, not be surprising if it were still to be found amidst the vast series of tapestries put away in the store-rooms of the royal palace in Madrid.

Instead, however, at the tent of Heber the Kenite, the scene passes within the entrance of a house, apparently studied from a Spanish country inn or "parador." Through an archway in the centre of the picture a view is seen into the open air, apparently into the courtyard of the inn, wherein are a yoke of oxen and a waggon. In the foreground, in the centre of the composition, lies Sisera prone on the ground, with the nail driven through his temples, a marshal's baton has dropped from his hands, and his helmet, adorned with a rich plume of white ostrich feathers, has fallen from his head and lies beside it. The rich armour in blue steel and gold, worn by the slain man, is of fine Italian cinquecento design intended to simulate antique Roman armour. It was painted in the most minute and careful manner from the celebrated suit made for the Emperor Charles V., said to have been worn by him at his entry into Bologna when about to be crowned by Pope Clement VII. in 1530. The suit is still preserved in the royal armoury at the palace in Madrid, from whence it has probably never been removed since its first deposition in the sixteenth century. The under hawkberk of ringed mail and some details [of the armour and helmet, represented on the picture, are now missing from the suit. (See *ante*, note, p. 7.)

Jaël represented as a young Spanish woman, in the costume of a peasant or the landlady of an inn, is standing on the spectator's right ; she holds out the hammer in her right hand, and seems to be recounting the facts of the deed to Barak. She wears a blue corset or vest with voluminous white linen sleeves, and a dark green gown or skirt. Barak, a stately aged man with a pointed white beard, is armed *cap-à-pie* in a splendid suit of engraved and gilded mail of the fashion of c. 1540-50, the helmet on his head decorated with a rich plume of white ostrich feathers. His right hand rests on a walking-staff, his left on the hilt of his sword, and he appears to be listening attentively to the recital of the heroine. This figure is a portrait of the famous Duke of Alva.

On the left-hand side of the picture is a standing figure of a man, clad in half armour of the fashion of Velazquez's own day. He has a red cap on his head which is also decorated with a tall plume of white

ostrich feathers ; he wears a short frock or kilt of dull pale crimson or pink colour, and dark green tight-fitting hose. This figure carries a banner on a tall staff, finished with a gilded spear-head and gold tassels. The banner is of green stuff trimmed with gold lace, and in the centre is a painted compartment with a remarkable emblem or "impresa." This personage represents the minister Olivarez. He stands in front with his back partly turned towards the spectator ; his countenance is seen in three-quarter profile, he is looking down on the slain Sisera, and he has his right hand uplifted in an attitude of astonishment. Behind the figure of Jacl stands a young soldier with a long lance ; he wears a steel cuirass over a buff coat, a dark crimson cap on his head with a small feather in it, and red hose. Behind Barak are three other soldiers in armour, bearing long lances, and the points of other lances, seen projecting into the picture in the same side, seem to indicate a numerous array of armed men stationed behind.



It was not until quite recently, and several years after the acquisition of the picture, that the signature on it, as it appears above, was discovered by the writer. It is situated in the right-hand lower corner near the margin of the picture. At some time or other the picture had probably been left for a long time without a frame and with its lower edge resting on the ground, consequently moisture had caused the paint to scale off in many places, for upwards of an inch all along the lower edge. To hide these defects the injured margin had been

coarsely repainted, this repaint it was necessary to remove, and on doing so, the signature, which had been covered by it came to light ; unfortunately, a large piece of the paint had scaled off in the centre of the inscription, whilst other parts of it were rendered almost illegible by decay ; enough, however, remains to show its purport and to leave little doubt as to its exact interpretation.

The signature is in two lines, an upper and a lower one ; it is written in cursive characters, but in an abbreviated or monogrammatic manner, greatly affected in Spain at the time.

The first monogrammatic capital letter is perfectly preserved ; it serves for the commencement of both lines, and for two separate letters —namely, a “D” and a “P,” the former for the upper and the latter for the lower line. The upper part of the character forming the “D” is fully and strongly marked, but the vertical downstroke is a thin and delicate, though precise and firmly-painted line ; following this on the upper line of the inscription is the commencement and tail-ending of another strongly-written character, interrupted in the centre by the missing scale of paint alluded to. This character was obviously the capital letter “V,” but it seems to have been compounded with some other letter, so as to form an abbreviated name or monogram ; for, rather more to the right and lower down a flourish or “paraphe” is visible, which in all probability formed part of the monogram, and most likely was appended to the terminal letter “z” of the name “Velazquez.” There can be little doubt that these compound initials formed the signature of the artist “Diego Velazquez.” The “paraphe” in question is followed by a large letter “f” in the same formula and position for “*fecit.*” The lower line of the inscription commences with the capital “P,” and although the line of delicately-written cursive writing which follows is all but obliterated, in all probability it read “*pictor regis,*” as in other instances of Velazquez’ signature. It will be recollected in confirmation of this interpretation that Velazquez was made painter to the king in the same year (1623) in which the picture was almost certainly painted.

Further with regard to the signature, it should be remarked, that there is no record of any artist other than Velazquez, at the period in question having enjoyed the patronage of either Olivarez or the king, so as to have been allowed to execute pictures within the precincts of the royal palaces. Nor is there any other known Spanish painter whose name could have been indicated by the initials above described.

As regards the *technique* of the picture, it is painted on canvas on a dull red ground, precisely such as all the early works of the master are executed upon. The picture is in perfect preservation, being entirely free from abrasions or retouching, but in the thinner and more transparent parts the dark ground-colour has pierced through, owing to the saponification and increased transparency of the pigments. The general effect however, is most luminous and brilliant ; and in force of colour, light and shade, and aerial quality, it is perhaps unsurpassed by any other work of the master. In respect of local colouring, the prominence of the peculiar light dull crimson and the low-toned brownish greens, which in combination, from first to last form the key-note of almost all the works of the great master, are especially conspicuous. The dimensions of the work are 4 feet 2 inches wide by 4 feet high.

In reference to the peculiarities of *technique* before alluded to, it may be noted that probably one of the next pictures in point of date by Velazquez in the New Gallery Exhibition, the Castle Howard *Portrait of the Infant Prince Balthazar Carlos, with the Female Dwarf* (No. 48), which is known to have been painted in 1631, does not show such a marked advance in style upon the *Jael and Sisera* as might perhaps have been expected to be made during the interval between the production of the two works. The Castle Howard picture is still more or less hard and precise, "tight" in execution, but like the *Jael and Sisera* it is much less solid in impasto than are the earlier *bodegone* pictures of Velazquez's Seville period. The *technique* and scheme of colour in general are indeed almost identical in both the pictures in question. The Castle Howard picture nevertheless, as was to be expected, shows to a certain extent, greater freedom of handling, more refined modelling of

forms, and a smoother surface. In both, however, a certain discordance of effect and want of harmony have resulted from the greater prominence of the dark underground of the picture which has resulted from lapse of time.

The plume of white feathers, in the cap of the infant prince in the Castle Howard picture, forms a similar prominent white spot in the picture as do the white plumes in the *Jacl and Sisera*; and this simply because these details, having been solidly painted in unchangeable white pigment, have retained their pristine force of colour, whilst almost all the other parts of the pictures have become much lower in tone from the sinking in of the thinner and more oleaginous colours employed in the darker parts of the work.

Writers in the press, for the most part acquainted only with the later works of Velazquez, have criticised the *Jacl and Sisera* from two opposite points of view; on the one hand it has been said, that the hardness of outline and general "tightness" of style of the picture are as great or even greater than in the earlier *bodegone* pictures, but others again have objected that a certain "bravura" execution or "chic" displayed in some parts of the *Jacl and Sisera* was inconsistent with Velazquez's style at the early period in question.

These opposing characteristics are indeed to a certain extent perceptible in the picture, but they are in reality confirmatory evidences of authorship. When the picture was painted, Velazquez had doubtless just received his first impressions from the master, who unquestionably thenceforth exercised the greatest influence upon his style—Il Greco—and the greater freedom and certainty of touch seen in the *Jacl and Sisera*, as compared with the earlier *bodegones*, are doubtless a first evidence of the new influence. The prominence given in the *Jacl and Sisera* and in other works of Velazquez, to the representation of bright sparkling steel armour, was probably also an influence derived from the same source. Whoever indeed has seen the famous and very admirable picture by Il Greco, *The Burial of the Conde de Orgaz* in Santo Tomé, at Toledo, will, it is thought, have little doubt as to the original source of this influence.

The *provenance* of the picture is entirely unknown. It was purchased in one of the London auction rooms some years ago, and no account of its previous ownership could be obtained. The work was in a neglected condition when acquired. The original old varnish on the surface was much chilled and decayed, whilst it was covered with a dense coat of accumulated "house dirt." It seems most likely therefore, that it was one of the many pictures brought over to this country during the Peninsular War, and that it had since found a resting place, disregarded and unvalued, in some country house, whence it was finally sent for sale as unconsidered lumber.

THREE LETTERS BY SIR CHARLES ROBINSON TO THE "TIMES" NEWSPAPER ON THE "JAEI AND SISERA" PICTURE

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "TIMES."

January 4, 1896.

SIR,—In your excellent notice of the New Gallery Spanish Exhibition, mention is made of the picture of Jael and Sisera, by Velazquez, and your reviewer has expressed his intention of giving it further consideration in another article. The coming to light of a hitherto unknown work of the great Spanish master is, in a sense a notable event in the art world, and I shall be glad if you can find space for a few brief notes respecting the picture, which, I think, will assist in elucidating the origin and meaning of the work.

If the picture stood simply on its merits it would, I think, carry conviction to those who have made the works and history of Velazquez their serious study; but there are both internal and indirect evidences, testifying to its authorship, singularly numerous and complete, so much so that I cannot call to mind any other instance of a picture to which so remarkable a chain of corroborative illustration attaches. The public will probably find out for themselves these indications, and perhaps other points which I have not yet myself fully grasped. The picture has, in fact, been sent to the New Gallery in order that it may be submitted to the most exhaustive criticism which can be bestowed upon it.

This process began forthwith, for one of your contemporaries has

already prejudged the question, apparently at the first glance, and has issued his *fiat* in the most approved style of the superior critic. He says:—"It is necessary, all the same, to enter a protest against the unaccountable ascription to him (Velazquez) of the curious if second-rate *Jael and Sisera*," &c. Now, on my part, I think it "necessary" to call this writer's attention to certain facts of which he was not aware when he issued this authoritative verdict. People will form their own judgment as to whether the picture is first-rate or "second-rate"; there may doubtless be differences of opinion upon that point, but I think there will be none as to the authenticity of the work when all the facts concerning it are laid before them, which they very shortly will be. In the meantime I have to state that, although I believe the evidences, direct and indirect, proving that the picture must be from the hand of Velazquez are decisive of the question, there is one positive confirmation which has not yet been taken into account. It is that the picture bears the signature of the artist unquestionably superimposed by his own hand. This signature reads "D. V.," with a large cursive "f.," following after, these characters obviously meaning "*Diego Velazquez fecit.*" This, moreover, is followed by a second line of cursive character, unfortunately almost illegible from decay, but of which the first capital letter, "P.," is well preserved. This line in all probability should be read as "*Pictor Regis*," which formula, it should be observed, was the usual one adopted by Velazquez in his signed works, after he was made painter to King Philip IV. The writer in the *Daily Telegraph* is now, then, invited to tell us what Spanish painter, other than Velazquez, working in Madrid in 1622 or 1623, and actually painting within the precincts of the Royal Palace—the evidence for both of which points is quite conclusive—could have produced this picture, and, further, what other Spanish painter there is who signed his pictures with the initials "D. V.," or anything like these letters, at any period.

I am anxious not to occupy too much of your space, but as regards this last matter, I should state that the biographers of Velazquez make known, that when he came up to Madrid for the first time, in 1622, his

friends at the Court procured him admission to the Palaces of the Crown in Madrid and the Escorial, where he spent his time in making studies from the art treasures of the Crown.

Your reviewer has already stated that the two principal suits of armour represented in the picture, were unquestionably painted from the actual suits originally belonging to the Emperor Charles V., and which are still preserved in the armoury in the Palace at Madrid, which they have never quitted since Velazquez's time. They must, in fact, have been most carefully and laboriously copied from the armour put in the position required by the exigencies of the composition. These suits are well known to me. I may state, indeed, that I myself had one or both of them photographed for the first time in Madrid in 1866 or 1867, for our own Government, and the photographs are still to be seen in the library of the South Kensington Museum. May I now call attention to a detail for the elucidation of which I wish to invite the co-operation of the public?

The figure, on the left side of the picture holding a banner, is without doubt a portrait of the Conde Duque Olivarez, then (1623) in his thirty-sixth year. It is consequently the earliest presentment of the famous Minister we possess. It is interesting to note the next portrait of him in point of date, four or five years later, that in the fine engraving executed by P. de Jode. Whilst this print shows Olivarez as a decidedly older man, it also shows him wearing the same armour, or a nearly similar suit, to that in the picture. This suit is in the fashion of his own day, and was doubtless the one actually worn by him.

That Olivarez should be represented as a standard-bearer is probably an allusion to his being the chief leader of the State, but this banner has obviously a further definite allegorical meaning. That meaning I have hitherto failed to fathom: and I am now desirous, through your columns, to invite the co-operation of your readers in its elucidation. There can be no doubt the banner was painted from an actual one; many similar ones were, to my knowledge, preserved in the Madrid armoury before the late fire—perhaps they are there still. As will be seen, it has a painted compartment in the centre, the subject of which is very remark-

able. It apparently represents a sailor seated in an attitude of dejection on the sea-shore, with his hands bound before him, whilst a fleet of three large ships is sailing away from the shore towards the distant horizon.

The question now to be solved is whether this device has any special reference to Olivarez, or whether it is merely one which happened to be on a banner in the Royal armoury, which was introduced into his picture by Velazquez as a mere convenient studio property. My own feeling is that the latter is the true explanation, but it is, I think, a fair subject for further consideration.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "TIMES."

January 14, 1896.

SIR,—*Cedant arma togæ*. It seems almost an impertinence to ask for any of your space, on a question of art, amidst these rumours of wars, but there are still people who retain their accustomed interest in problems of art and story. May I, then, offer a few more notes about this newly-discovered *Jael and Sisera* picture, in sequel to my letter in your issue of the 4th instant?

I have first to correct a slight mistake in my former communication. Alluding to the fine engraved portrait of Olivarez, the name of the engraver should have been Paul Pontius, not P. de Jode. I shall cause a photograph of this print to be placed near the picture in the New Gallery. I wish now to direct attention to the peculiar "cut" of Olivarez's brown hair, identical in the picture and the engraving and in other of his early presentments; later on Olivarez seems to have become bald, whereupon he provided himself with a black wig (see the portrait No. 45 in the New Gallery, in which he seems so embellished). He was always high-shouldered, almost hunchbacked, a peculiarity which was cruelly commented on by his detractors at the period of his fall. Velazquez, as a true Court painter, is said to have adroitly softened down this admitted deformity in the portraits of his patron. The position of

the figure of Olivarez in the present work appears, indeed, to have been chosen with this intention in view.

The corresponding principal figure on the opposite side of the picture, the stately, gray-bearded old man, posing as Barak the Israelite, armed, nevertheless, *cap-à-pie* in a splendid suit of armour of the fashion of 1540-50, is most certainly a posthumous portrait of the great Duke of Alva. Pictures and prints of that celebrated personage are unusually numerous ; there is, in fact, perhaps no better known historical portrait. All the engraved portraits represent Alva in similar rich armour, but, although the suits are very much alike, no two are exactly the same. The suit represented in the present picture, again, though a similar one, does not correspond with any one of them. The explanation is obvious and suggestive ; in fact, this suit was not one worn by Alva, but on the contrary, by his Sovereign, the Emperor Charles V. No less than nineteen suits which belonged to the Emperor are still preserved in the Madrid Armoury. These suits are distinguishable by certain devices uniformly engraved upon all of them ; these are—on the upper part of the cuirass in front, an oval gilded compartment or aureole with an engraved standing figure of the Virgin surrounded by rays, and on the back plate, Santa Barbara. Now this aureole is plainly to be seen represented on the suit worn by Alva in the present picture. There has not yet been time to ascertain whether or not this particular suit is amongst those still in the armoury, but which, it should be observed, form only a remaining portion of the splendid series known to have been originally in the possession of Charles V. The characteristic and striking head in profile behind the Alva figure is obviously a lifelike portrait. I fear there will be no means of identifying the individual, but I think it highly probable that it was some one of Velazquez's Seville friends, perhaps Fonseca, or some other of the Madrid Palace officials. Clearly the individual must have been a personage of importance, or he would not have been so conspicuously introduced into such high company.

As to the Jael, this lady was, I believe, painted from an ordinary model. It would have been contrary to all Spanish usage and

etiquette to have introduced the portrait of any high-bred lady into such a picture.

More interesting is it to take note of the young soldier, holding a lance who stands behind Jael. The dull, stolid-looking countenance of this young man obviously again indicates, that it was not that of any distinguished personage, and, in fact, there cannot be a doubt that this head, again, was painted from an ordinary model. Unless, indeed, I am much mistaken, this model can be positively identified.

If any of your readers will take the trouble to look at the Duke of Wellington's picture, the *Aguador de Sevilla* (No. 134 in the New Gallery Exhibition), and Sir Francis Cook's *Woman making an Omelette* (No. 135), which hangs beside it, they will see in both these pictures the same head of a stolid, heavy-looking Spanish lad of about sixteen or seventeen. Now this boy is undoubtedly the *Mozo* or apprentice whom at the time when these pictures were painted (1620) Velazquez had taken into his service for the express purpose, as Pacheco informs us, of serving as a model in his pictures. Now the *Jael and Sisera* was painted two or three years later; consequently the boy in question would then be nineteen or twenty years old. Allowing for the difference of age, it appears to me almost certain that this same boy posed for the soldier with a lance. It will be noted that he has now the rudiments of a beard and moustache, such as would doubtless have made their appearance at the age the young man had arrived at.

It is rather unfortunate that this figure, having been originally rather more thinly and slightly painted than the foreground figures, has suffered somewhat, and become less distinct than it originally was, from the piercing through of the dark-red ground on which the picture was painted, and the coincident increased transparency of the pigment, the result of saponification of the vehicle in the course of time.

As to the head of the slain Sisera, with the nail driven into the temples

unquestionably this head must have been painted from nature, most probably from that of a decapitated criminal.

There would have been little difficulty in obtaining such a gruesome piece of "still life" to paint from in Velazquez's time in Spain.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "TIMES."

January 20, 1896.

SIR,—I have still to ask you to kindly allow me space for a few concluding notes on the *Jaël and Sisera*, with the view mainly of stating what I conceive to have been the meaning and intention of the composition, and the circumstances under which it was produced. This picture may obviously be considered as a kind of *tableau vivant*, a representation of a biblical subject enacted, as it were, by Spanish performers in Spain in the seventeenth century. What, then, were the occasion and motives which gave rise to such a performance?

In the first place one of the chief actors is the Conde Duque Olivarez—he bears the banner. Curiously enough, of the very scanty notices of the personal views or sayings of Velazquez which have come down to us, this banner-bearing as a mark of supreme leadership is notable as having been in his mind.

The contemporary Venetian writer on painting, Marco Boschini,¹ relating a conversation with Velazquez as to the principal art heroes of Italy, reports that Velazquez said,

"Titian is he who bears the banner."

Olivarez, then, in like manner figures in this picture as the standard-bearer of the State; and why he should be so depicted will, I think, be made evident by the explanation of the composition I am about to offer.

¹ Boschini, *Carta del Navegar*, &c., Venice, 1660. Textually in the Venetian dialect, in which this work is written—

"Tician xè quel, che porta la bandiera."

The picture is, I believe, substantially an allegorical one—a veiled allusion, in fact, to an event in recent Spanish history. Allegories were the fashion of the day, especially in Spain. The very next historical picture painted by Velazquez, about four years later—*The Expulsion of the Moriscos*—was also purely allegorical in treatment, with precisely such an allusion to a recent actual event.

The present composition, then, was, I believe, intended as an allusion to the assassination of the arch-enemy of Spain, William the Silent of Orange, by Balthazar Gerard in the preceding century. Moreover, that such a subject should have been chosen may be accounted for by the fact, that at this time (1622 or 1623) Olivarez, then at the outset of his career of absolute power, had determined to recommence the struggle with the revolted Dutch provinces, which had been discontinued for almost a generation previously by his more pacific predecessor, the Cardinal Duke of Lerma. Olivarez, indeed, unable to realise the fact of the complete decadence of Spain which had taken place in the previous reign, and in the first flush of his pride of place and power, was on the very point of beginning the disastrous career of aggression and warlike enterprise by which his own and his country's ruin were ultimately accomplished.

The assassination of William of Orange, in consequence of the price put upon his head by Philip II., was esteemed one of the standing glories and evidences of the might of Spain. As an illustration of the savage national feeling, it may be stated that a few years only after the picture now in question was painted, the death of Gustavus Adolphus, another of the great enemies of the house of Austria, was celebrated in Madrid by the most extravagant popular rejoicings, extending over no less than forty days. It may be furthermore observed that the United Provinces were still, at the period in question, under the leadership of an immediate descendant of the hated William the Silent.

The *Jael and Sisera* is then, in the fullest sense of the term, an historical picture. It is unquestionably the first of which we have any record produced by the great painter, but it was also the typical precursor of other more important ones from his hand. The composition of

the famous picture, *The Surrender of Breda* (*Las Lanças*), so called from the prominent and striking array of soldiers bearing tall lances on each side of the picture was, I think, obviously based on the quite similar arrangement in the *Jael and Sisera*.

It is important to remark, moreover, that *The Surrender of Breda* was one of the only gleams of success which illumined the career of Olivarez. As that occurrence took place only two or three years after the production of the *Jael and Sisera*, so it was also the principal event in the life of another of the personal friends and protectors of Velazquez—the Marquis Spinola.

In further allusion to the remarkable and entirely original composition of the *Jael and Sisera*, it may be further noted that the archway in the centre, through which a second plane of action is seen, is precisely that of the picture of *Las Hilanderas* (the Spinners), where a part of the action of the subject is seen through a similar central archway. The *Hilanderas* was one of the latest works of Velazquez, but it gives evidence that the great painter had not forgotten his early production now in question.

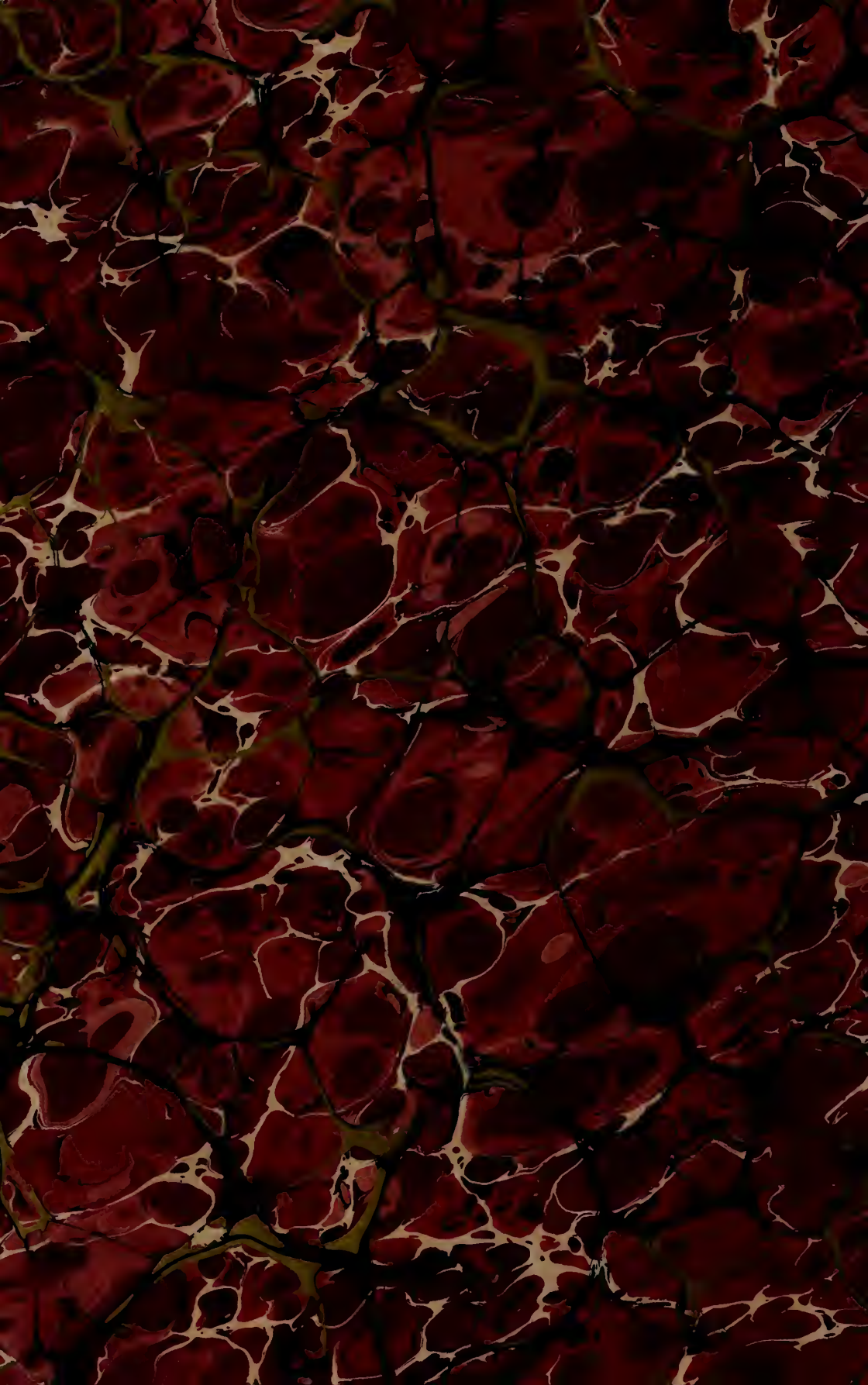
As to the precise time when the *Jael and Sisera* was painted, and whether the choice and general working out of the subject were the artist's own or suggested to him by others, there would be ample scope for further illustration and speculation, but your space is too valuable to admit of other than a few more brief remarks on these heads. Obviously the picture could not have been painted earlier than 1622, for it was in that year that Velazquez first went to Madrid. The general style and *technique* of the picture, moreover, point directly to that period of development of his art; but if the supposition that the almost illegible second line of the signature should be read as *Pictor Regis* be correct the work should seemingly be referred to the next year, for it was not till the autumn of 1623 that Velazquez was made painter to the king.

My own impression is that the picture was one of the works undertaken in 1622, when Velazquez was first allowed to work in the Royal galleries, and where only it is evident he could have painted the armour,

&c., but that it may not have been finished till 1623, when the signature would be appended as the first evidence of his new dignity.

It seems to me, in conclusion, more likely that Fonseca or some other of Velazquez's friends suggested the subject and the mode of its treatment, than that a work, with so obvious a political meaning, should have been the spontaneous conception of the painter himself.

In any case, as a production calculated to second the known intentions of the vainglorious Minister, it is, I think, reasonable to suppose that it may have had a valuable influence on the fortunes of the artist.





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